

## Cutting costs to stay competitive

**E**ric Chartrand, president/owner of Autocar Chartrand in Quebec, does all he can to help the environment, while maintaining the quality of his fleet, to keep ahead of the area's stiff competition.

Chartrand recently purchased six 2009 Prevost H3-45 motorcoaches featuring the Volvo D 13 engine, thus replacing his entire motorcoach fleet with new, cleaner vehicles.

"The big reason we made the decision to purchase new buses was quality," explains Chartrand. "It's easier to give good service with brand new buses. It may cost more, but in the end everybody is happy."

Chartrand adds that the new engines have improved fuel consumption and the switch has helped the operation maintain a more streamlined stockroom.

"It helps us to only have to worry about the basics, such as oil changes and things of that nature, so we don't have to house a lot of parts" he says of getting new coaches.

By Quebec law, all heavy vehicles have to pass a "mechanical verification" test every six months, and, as a testing facility and motorcoach operator, the operation is expected to stay ahead of the curve.

"If we do a mechanic verification for a competitor, our fleet has to be better than theirs," says Chartrand. "It keeps us on top of things."

Calling his operation the "greenest company in Quebec," Chartrand also has a new, cleaner fleet of school buses, which earn him tax breaks, and runs a testing facility that is similar to the smog check system used in the U.S.

"Just like you do in the U.S., Canada wants to have clean air," he says. "Everybody has to do their part to enjoy that, and these are the things we do to help."

With business doing well at the moment despite the stiff competition, the operation does not advertise, earning most of its business from return customers or by word-of-mouth. Therefore, Chartrand believes that his operations' biggest obstacles are staying competitive when rivals begin lowering their prices, the value of the Canadian dollar compared to the U.S. dollar and fuel costs.

"The change of the value of our dollar is sometimes difficult when we are trying to purchase or sell something in the U.S., or when we are doing things like making hotel reservations for trips," he says. "Sometimes we win, but sometimes we lose and it costs a lot more money."

As far as competing, Chartrand says that his experienced drivers — some around as long as 20 years — and brand new coaches help him sell a quality service instead of one that is just cheap. To help keep pricing both competitive and profitable, and to help offset escalating fuel prices, Chartrand and his staff review their prices every six months, adjusting accordingly depending on the cost of fuel.

The operation's biggest challenge down the road, Chartrand believes, will be in turning the fleet around so that he can keep his coaches no older than 2.5 years old.

"We always want to keep our buses new so that we can continue operating at a high quality," he says. "Figuring out how we can consistently do that will be a difficult task." — ALEX ROMAN

### AT A GLANCE

**MOTORCOACHES:** 6

**FLEET MIX:** Prevost H3-45s

**EMPLOYEES:** 180

**DRIVERS:** 150

**SERVICE AREA:** Canada, U.S.

**SERVICES OFFERED:** charter, school bus, paratransit

**YEAR STARTED:** 1986

**AVERAGE ANNUAL MILEAGE:** 750,000

**PRESIDENT:** Eric Chartrand



## Employing technology for efficient motorcoach maintenance

**A**merica Charters LTD (ACL) originally began as a bus transportation service for textile employees and citizens of Gaston County, N.C. In 1977, when the city took over the services, ACL became strictly a charter bus company.

Despite being purchased by Coach USA in 1997, ACL, which now operates as a subsidiary of Coach America, has remained a family-oriented business thanks to Billy Ray Rhyne, grandson of its original founder, still serving as president of the operation.

"We have been able to maintain the same family-style 'look and feel' that originally existed from the inception of the business," says Doug Woodie, maintenance director. "As a result, a majority of people in the office have been here for what feels like forever."

For his part, Woodie has been with ACL off and on for nearly 20 years. He says that maintaining this family atmosphere, along with small perks such as flexible scheduling, makes it a pleasurable place to work. Woodie also believes it is the primary reason that ACL has created a top-notch maintenance program, with some of their vehicles continuously running since 1994.

"The bus business is a disease. It gets in your blood, and for some of us that's all we know," he says. "We have been lucky to end up with these guys that really dig the bus. A majority of our mechanic staff has now been together for more than a decade."

One new addition that is helping ACL increase its maintenance efficiency is the FleetAnywhere software program provided by Coach America, which helps with record keeping and cost analysis, making everything transparent from top to bottom. Each individual affiliated company has the capability to view and analyze each others' records, inventories, costs and more.

"The ability to determine the operating cost of each individual piece of equipment is paramount. This program makes that determination obvious," says Woodie. "It really does more than we will ever use it for. Compared to our antiquated pen and paper system, it's the cat's meow."

Woodie adds that the program has been especially helpful in tracking the service records of vehicles, giving the garage the ability to see if any problems they are experiencing are persistent enough to warrant a closer look.

Recent changes in the garage include new mandates to shut-down to reduce unnecessary idling and a reduced top speed of 65 mph for all coaches. The latter added time to many of ACL's trips and posed a learning curve for the entire operation that Woodie says is now firmly under control.

To keep its maintenance department sharp, ACL provides its staff with all the tools and training available to perform their individual tasks in as safe and efficient a manner as possible. To do this, the operation sends staff members to take part in many of its vehicle supplier's (ABC Companies) in-house training classes. Now that ACL has a larger corporate backing, it is also able to request that some suppliers send their staff out to its headquarters in Charlotte to hold classes, adds Woodie, who also credits his staff's desire to learn about cutting-edge technologies as bus manufacturers continue to add them to their motorcoaches.

"We are very fortunate that these guys are hungry to do this stuff, they want to learn, and are, therefore, very interested all the time," he says. "Especially since the manufacturers are always adding new and innovative features to their coaches. Their attitudes are really a plus for us."  
— ALEX ROMAN

### AT A GLANCE

**MOTORCOACHES:** 65

**FLEET MIX:** Van Hool T800s, T900s, T2145s and C2045s

**EMPLOYEES:** 36

**DRIVERS:** 138

**SERVICE AREA:** U.S. and Canada

**SERVICES OFFERED:** charter, tour, athletic and corporate commuter

**YEAR STARTED:** 1937

**AVERAGE ANNUAL MILEAGE:** 2.6 million

**PRESIDENT:** Billy Ray Rhyne



## Business growth fuels expansion

At the suggestion of their daughter, **Judy Lewis**, the **Dugals** — **Paul** and **Patricia** — started **Caz Limo and Tours** with two limousines that they purchased in March 2000. Operating out of their home, the Dugals served as their own two-person staff, doing everything from marketing to taking reservations to chauffeuring and cleaning the vehicles. Hoping to pick up some prom business, they began leaving flyers on cars at high schools, and then things started taking off.

Today, they have a fleet composed of limousines, luxury vehicles and more than 27 motorcoaches, including MCI J4500s. The company boasted a growth rate of 35 percent a year over their first eight years.

One of Caz's most successful business ventures is its partnership with Ithaca, N.Y.-based **Cornell University**, where it provides staff, students, visitors and faculty with luxury shuttle services from Ithaca to the university's **Weill Cornell Medical College**, the **Cornell Club**, the **Cornell University Center for Advanced Computing** facility and the **School of Industrial and Labor Relations** extension office in New York City.

"We started our executive class service with Cornell University in 2004, when they came to us and asked if we'd be willing to do a pilot program for them because they were fed up with the unreliability and high cost of the airlines going from Ithaca to La Guardia," explains Paul Dugal, sr. vice president, director of operations, for Caz.

The service has grown to six coaches that make two trips daily, seven days a week.

"With Wi-Fi and the ability to use their laptops and such, it's like a classroom on wheels for them," says Dugal. "We've only

missed one date in four years and that was because the roads were totally shut down because of a storm."

In fact, the program with Cornell has been so successful that Caz will begin running a similar program for **Syracuse University** with two coaches.

To help cut down on the cost of new vehicles, Caz has created a sister company, **Creative Coach Design LLC**, to do all of the conversions at their own facilities.

"We buy the buses as shells and are able to build them at a very economical price, rather than going to the aftermarket and paying a lot more money," says Dugal. "It's turned out to be a successful arm of the business."

Caz also provides a Manhattan express service, has 150 sports team contracts with as many as 10 different colleges and universities in Central New York, and is the largest corporate transportation company in the region.

Dugal says that his operation's biggest challenge is managing growth and admits that there have been some setbacks coupled to its successes.

Having outgrown its current facility, Dugal and his family plan on building a new 20,000-plus square-foot, LEED-type facility to house its offices, vehicles and vehicle conversion business. The operation also hopes to expand its use of biodiesel as part of its move to go greener.

"We are using biodiesel in some applications, but our biggest problem is when we [are on the road] for a few days because it is very difficult to find on the open market," says Dugal. "For our local [trips], we are able to use biodiesel, though, and Cornell is looking at providing us with biodiesel there for their runs, which are now up to 14 trips a week." — **ALEX ROMAN**

### AT A GLANCE

**MOTORCOACHES:** 27

**FLEET MIX:** MCI J4500s, Van Hool

**EMPLOYEES:** 15

**DRIVERS:** 40

**SERVICE AREA:** Northeast, Florida

**SERVICES OFFERED:** charter, tour, schools, casino and contract

**YEAR STARTED:** 2000

**AVERAGE ANNUAL MILEAGE:** 750,000

**SR. VICE PRESIDENT:** Paul Dugal



## Eye-catching coaches bring in business

**A**s a Cuban exile arriving in the U.S. in 1961, **Raul Espinosa** had nothing but his family, \$10 in his pocket and a watch, as well as a minimal ability to speak English. More than 40 years later, his hard work has left an indelible mark on the Latin community in the form of Miami-based coach company **La Cubana**.

"The man was amazing. He was somebody who would not give up," says Espinosa's daughter, **Rosa Alvarez** of her late father. "To be honest with you, I do not know if I would have persevered the way he did."

Alvarez, who took over as vice president after her father passed away, explains that it was a long trip for her father to get La Cubana off the ground. In 1965, Espinosa started transporting people in his station wagon from Miami to New York. He gradually increased the size of his vehicles and purchased his first bus around 1974. However, at the time, only **Greyhound** and **Trailways** had the authority to move passengers via interstate travel, so Espinosa had to prove to the **Interstate Commerce Commission** that his services were necessary.

"He basically said that there were too many Hispanics and that they needed a Hispanic bus company," says Alvarez. "He had worked like a dog to that point, and getting authorization to provide interstate travel allowed him to be legitimate."

Alvarez began working for her father in New Jersey in 1989, and then moved to Florida in 1990. When her father passed away in 1994, she began running the operation herself and made many changes, including hiring a "better class" of drivers, purchasing new motorcoaches and updating the look of the coaches.

"My father had always had coaches that were red, white and blue. When I took over, we switched to all these crazy rainbow

colors and changed our logo to help catch people's attention," says Alvarez.

The switch to the rainbow colored coaches happened accidentally, though, when a salesman told her that all he had in stock was a yellow and black bus.

"He insisted that it was beautiful and that I should go to New Jersey to look at it. When I got there, the bus wasn't yellow and black; it was actually hot pink pearl with a yellow rainbow and a black front. It was wild," laughs Alvarez. "I thought to myself 'my god this is really something different, it would definitely catch somebody's eye,' so I took it."

With La Cubana and its 800-number written prominently across the back, the coaches serve as a rolling billboard for the operation. Alvarez also runs TV, radio, magazine and newspaper advertisements to help increase business in several markets, including New York; New Jersey; Washington, D.C.; Miami and West Palm Beach, Fla., and uses the easily identifiable coaches to hammer home to her drivers the importance of good etiquette on the road.

"I tell them if they mess up on the road, people are going to call, because our coaches are so recognizable," says Alvarez. "Knowing that, I think, keeps them sharp."

Alvarez credits her loyal customer base to La Cubana's ability to outdo its competitors and always updating its fleet with new and improved coaches. She plans on adding five new MCI coaches this year and updates the fleet every two-and-a-half to three years.

The operation also celebrated its 30th anniversary in August. For Alvarez, it was a time to reflect on the hard work of her father.

"He unfortunately wasn't there, but he was definitely remembered," says Alvarez. "What he did was very influential. He started from scratch and built what has become a household name for many people."

— ALEX ROMAN

### AT A GLANCE

**MOTORCOACHES:** 11

**FLEET MIX:** MCI J4500s

**EMPLOYEES:** 16

**DRIVERS:** 19 full time, 22 part time

**SERVICE AREA:** East coast

**SERVICES OFFERED:** charter

**YEAR STARTED:** 1978

**AVERAGE ANNUAL MILEAGE:** 42,000

**VICE PRESIDENT:** Rosa Alvarez



## Running leaner through downsizing

**S**t. Louis, Mo.-based Mid American Coaches has seen a lot in its more than four decades in business. The company, which began as a six-bus transit line and occasional charter in 1927, has grown into a successful 23-vehicle charter service and tour operation.

Dennis Jones, vice president, and Roger Jones, president, whose father Ralph purchased the company in 1957, are discovering there's no better time than the present to tighten Mid American's enterprise.

"The economy is hurting everyone," says Dennis Jones. In response, the company recently made some bold changes to its operation, which have drastically affected Mid American's bottom line.

After a detailed inspection of the company's maintenance department, Dennis discovered a more lucrative method of managing its parts supply. "We realized that our parts situation was out of hand," he says. "For years we were too heavily stocked."

Although to some operators, having more than you need is better than not having that part when you really need it, Jones saw the situation as an opportunity to save on the cost of having a fully stocked parts department. With the availability of next-day air and the close proximity of manufacturer facilities, Mid American no longer needed to spend the extra money to keep all of its parts on hand. "It just didn't make sense anymore," he says. "We have saved a lot of money just by changing that one thing."

"The state of the economy has made us more conscious of exactly what our costs are," says Jones. Because of this, he adds,

the company has reduced the size of its fleet from 43 vehicles in the early '90s, to 23 vehicles today. Jones believes this has made a huge difference in revenue.

"Instead of having unused vehicles in the yard," says Jones, "sometimes we just have to say no on the busy days." The cost savings in vehicle maintenance and equipment more than make up for it, Jones adds. In turn, downsizing has found Mid American running leaner and more efficiently in the long run.

Instead of holding on to hardly-used motorcoaches, the coach company also recently purchased five new fuel-efficient coaches to add to its fleet. All of the new vehicles are equipped with the latest in EGR engine technology. "We prefer to invest in new coaches with newer technologies to protect the environment," says Jones.

In addition to efficiency, Mid American Tours takes its safety record very seriously. In a tough economy, with many operators attracting business by slashing rates, Mid American is tightening its safety standards and saving money at the same time.

The company has two dedicated safety officers who manage the safety and training of its drivers. "In the past, we were incurring a lot of damage to our vehicles," says Jones. "This program has changed everything." The training team does frequent ride alongs, monitors the company's DriveCam systems and retrain drivers when it is deemed necessary.

In addition to minimizing damage and eliminating unnecessary fuel costs due to idling and speeding, Jones says the program has instilled an added sense of morale among Mid American's drivers. "Our drivers have a great rapport with the safety officers," says Jones, "and appreciate the training." — CAMELLA LOBO

### AT A GLANCE

**MOTORCOACHES:** 22

**FLEET MIX:** MCI, Prevost, Setra, Van Hool

**EMPLOYEES:** 54

**DRIVERS:** 41

**SERVICE AREA:** U.S. and Canada

**SERVICES OFFERED:** charters and tours

**YEAR STARTED:** 1927

**VICE PRESIDENT:** Dennis Jones



## Safety first, passenger comfort foremost

To help modernize their fleet, cut down on maintenance costs and attract customers, **Tai Pan Tours** recently invested \$5 million in 10 brand new **Setra S 417s**. The company hopes the new additions will help their aspirations of “the art of living, respecting the uniqueness of people and places, and the appreciation of life.”

“The European brand has a big appeal to a majority of our customer base,” says **Danny W.L. Tang**, vice president, finance and operations. “It was definitely the right time to move to more innovative coaches.”

Tai Pan’s new Setras feature the Top Sky roof — a favorite among its customers — scenic view cameras, leather headrests and Nimbus seats with magazine nets. What Tai Pan really likes about its new coaches, however, are the reduced emissions, HVAC system and multiplex electrical system with self diagnostics, which help them extend maintenance intervals and show their commitment to being environmentally aware.

The operation uses its new Setras for its **Casino Rama** runs, which runs 50 routes 24/7, with pick-up locations throughout the greater Toronto area. To help increase that arm of its already successful business, the operation recently ran a well-received “Ride 5 Get 1 Free” campaign. Tang says that promotions such as these are important because of the area’s large Asian population, who have a culture of searching for value. Still, Tang adds that his operation’s client base is about 50/50, so that search for value is universal, especially during the current, difficult economic times.

Aside from its luxury coaches, Tai Pan also boasts a strong commitment to safety training and was recently awarded an

Outstanding Achievement Certificate from the **Transportation Health & Safety Association of Ontario** for attaining a higher safety standard among other companies of its same kind over a three-year period.

“Safety training is embedded into our whole philosophy, policies and procedures,” says Tang, who adds that there are still many obstacles that Tai Pan faces, including declining business during the cold Toronto winters.

“It’s not an easy business, it’s very tough, and the reason is because you don’t have a smooth demand throughout the whole year. So, you have to smooth out your capacity and take advantage of the busy months to help get you through the slower ones,” he says.

To help increase business during the cold months, Tai Pan is concentrating on ski trips and staying competitive with its pricing, while also opening its garage to service trucks and coaches from other local businesses.

But, the operations’ biggest challenge, Tang says, is retaining mechanics and drivers during these slower months and building a succession plan should these skilled laborers leave. To help remedy that issue, Tai Pan keeps all of its mechanics and drivers well-trained, so that if somebody does leave, there is somebody fully capable available to step in.

“If one or two of your drivers or mechanics leave, it could really cause a lot of chaos,” he explains. “That’s why you develop training programs and a succession plan to fill those positions, because those people are so important. As long as you have fully staffed and certified personnel, you’ll always be fine.”

— ALEX ROMAN

### AT A GLANCE

**MOTORCOACHES:** 49

**FLEET MIX:** Prevost and Setra

**EMPLOYEES:** 32

**DRIVERS:** 100 (80 full time, 20 part time)

**SERVICE AREA:** Ontario, Quebec, the Maritimes, and Northeastern & Southeastern U.S.

**SERVICES OFFERED:** charter, shuttle, tour, airport and local transfer

**YEAR STARTED:** 1998

**AVERAGE ANNUAL MILEAGE:** 4.5 million (estimate)

**VICE PRESIDENT:** Danny W.L. Tang (pictured)



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## Adapting and building relationships boosts business

People often owe their success in business to their ability to adapt. **Richard Maben**, president of **Utah Trailways**, has been adapting his business since its inception, with positive results.

Beginning as a casino tour operator in 1982, Maben would have to contract motorcoach operators to conduct his trips, until he finally purchased his first motorcoach in 1985. Coining his operation **Casino Caravans**, Maben's business focused primarily on casino runs until the mid-1990s, when he says that end of the business slowed down, forcing him to look into providing charters. Then, in 2002, he decided to join the **Trailways** network.

"In this market where there's a large religious preference, I thought that there would be a large part of the market that isn't going to call me with the name Casino Caravans," explains Maben. "After investigating the Trailways network, I joined and the name recognition here was just incredible. It then became a big part of our marketing."

Maben tore off all the old Casino Caravans logos, replaced them with Trailways logos and soon saw his business increase, especially in the school and church group charter sector. Today, he says that his business is about 80 percent charters and 20 percent casino runs. He also says that it has been beneficial having Trailways in his corner. "No matter what part of the country we're in, if we have a problem, there's usually a Trailways company around that just bends over backwards to help us out."

To help increase business, Maben recently adapted again by choosing to update his Website and begin moving away from typical advertising mediums, such as the **Yellow Pages**.

"We wanted to increase our presence on the Web, so we worked on improving our site and finding out how to improve our odds

of coming up at the top of all the search engines," explains Maben. "One of the things we added was a little video of me talking about the company. Nobody is calling me up for spokesmodel jobs, but we've gotten positive feedback from our customers."

Maben adds that, ironically, it was **YellowPages.com** that came to his operation and helped update the site, taught him what he can do to improve his Web presence and actually helped shoot the video.

"We really thought the idea of putting more action into our Website was a good one," Maben says.

From the beginning, Maben has prided himself on having the most updated motorcoaches in the area and today is no different. Utah Trailways recently purchased four new **Setra** motorcoaches from **Daimler Buses North America** that boast features that Maben says nobody else in the area has, including GPS systems, satellite TV and wireless Internet. He also adds that his operation carries the **U.S. Department of Transportation's** highest safety rating, and that he often urges his customers to find out what that entails by visiting the Website.

"We never knock the competition, but urge our customers to look for themselves," he says.

Maben says that perhaps the biggest key to his operations' success is his ability to build and maintain relationships with his customers, adding that there are many people, particularly on his casino runs, that have been traveling with him since he first began.

"I always look at the example of some of the bus manufacturers and distributors that we work with because they do a great job of building relationships with us bus operators," Maben says. "Nobody that I know of does it better than these entities, so what we can, we copy from them, and it has really paid off with many loyal customers."

— ALEX ROMAN

### AT A GLANCE

**MOTORCOACHES:** 17

**FLEET MIX:** Setra, Van Hool, ABC

**EMPLOYEES:** 22

**DRIVERS:** 33

**SERVICE AREA:** U.S. and Canada

**SERVICES OFFERED:** charter, tour, athletic, casino

**YEAR STARTED:** 1982

**AVERAGE ANNUAL MILEAGE:** 1.25 million

**PRESIDENT:** Richard Maben (pictured)



## Reputation built on attention to details

**J**immy Hall, owner of Hampton Roads, Va.-based **Venture Bus Tours**, has buses in his blood. He began working for his grandfather's bus company, **Gallop Tours**, when he was just a child. "I was cleaning buses and driving them around the yard when I was eight years old," says Hall.

After many years as Gallop's shop manager, a change in company ownership prompted Hall to blaze his own trail in the bus market. Armed with only the knowledge he received from his late grandfather, Hall launched **Venture Bus Tours** in 1993.

"Jimmy started this business on his own. He took that experience and started from scratch," says **Sebastian Scott**, **Venture's** dispatch and operations manager.

Fifteen years later, the company is setting the standard for innovation in the bus charter industry.

**Venture's** great success has come from its word-of-mouth reputation for consistent attention to little details that make a huge difference to riders. The company, which caters to the area's athletic teams and military personnel, makes sure its clients are more than just satisfied with the ride.

"We've had some of our clients say they're more comfortable in our buses than they are at home," says fleet manager **Danny Langemeier**.

In order to offer this level of comfort, **Venture** dedicates two of its shop personnel strictly to fine-tuning the interior of its vehicles on a regular basis. Most of **Venture's** buses are equipped with wireless Internet, LCD televisions, state-of-the-art sound systems and plug-ins at each seat.

The company has even removed the seats in some of its luxury buses to provide more legroom to its super-sized athletic clients.

In addition to regular maintenance, **Scott** credits the installation of **DriveCam** and GPS monitoring systems in all of the company's vehicles with keeping its drivers and passengers safe and buses operating efficiently.

**Venture Bus Tours** recently purchased two new 81-passenger **Van Hool** double-decker buses. Although **Hall** agrees that the slowing economy has affected ridership, he believes the new buses offer a great value not only for riders but the environment as well.

"With its increased passenger capacity, it takes another bus off of the road and increases revenue at the same time," says **Hall**. "It's a win-win situation."

In addition, **Venture** has increased fuel mileage by frequently tuning up its vehicles and paying attention to braking mechanisms and how they affect tire wear and tear.

"Our use of **Jake Brakes** has increased bus mileage from 5 mpg to 5 1/2 to 6 mpg," adds **Scott**.

Above everything, **Hall**, **Scott** and **Langemeier** credit **Venture Bus Tours'** success to a shared philosophy of teamwork and by making themselves accessible to their customers and employees 24 hours a day. "We don't have an ivory tower here," says **Scott**. "Any time you call this office you can get one of us on the phone."

The **Venture** team is thankful for their ability to evenly disperse the burden of running a company efficiently among the three of them, especially in a 24/7 industry.

"I am very fortunate to have these two people with me," says **Langemeier**.

"And, if one of us gets weak," adds **Hall**, "there is always someone there to pick you up." — **CAMELLA LOBO**

### AT A GLANCE

**MOTORCOACHES:** 23, 15 passenger vans

**FLEET MIX:** Prevost, MCI, Van Hool and Krystal

**EMPLOYEES:** 14

**DRIVERS:** 55

**SERVICE AREA:** Virginia, including Hampton Roads, Virginia Beach, Norfolk and Newport News, as well as Northeastern North Carolina

**SERVICES OFFERED:** military, athletic, school and casino

**YEAR STARTED:** 1993

**AVERAGE ANNUAL MILEAGE:** 754,224 (2007)

**OWNER:** Jimmy Hall

